

Book Launch: The Tommy Koh Reader



On 17 December 2013, World Scientific launched Ambassador Tommy Koh's book, *The Tommy Koh Reader: Favourite Essays and Lectures*, at the Central Public Library. The turn-out was very good and people of various ages and background were in attendance. As most of the seats were filled 10 minutes before the event started, Prof Koh decided to take to the stage and warm the audience up with a few funny anecdotes from his diplomatic career. With the ice broken, everyone was at ease and the whole event continued in a rather casual atmosphere. The following is a brief sketch of some of the questions and points made during the launch.

What struck me about the mild mannered ambassador was how down-to-earth he was. Even during a very flattering introduction, Prof Koh was more concerned with ensuring that the audience members have a seat as he kept indicating to the ushers how many available seats were there. His humility shone through again when he was asked by the moderator why was the book dedicated to all the personal assistants that have worked for him throughout his career. He replied that he wanted to go against the grain of looking up to people high on the value chain by acknowledging the collective contributions of his subordinates as his career would be impossible without them.

He proceeded to talk about his time as ambassador to America candidly and how, despite her size, Singapore can be an effective and important diplomatic partner due to a strong bilateral trade relations. He also emphasised the importance of working with the other ASEAN countries in order to have a stronger presence in lobbying for the region's interest.

When asked about the most difficult aspect of being a diplomat, he replied light-heartedly that it was very difficult to stay in shape due to the numerous functions he had to attend every single day with lots of wine and food. As the audience's laughter died down, he went on to talk about a few difficult cases that he dealt with during his time as the ambassador

to the US and UN. While some of the cases were more successfully resolved than others, he stressed that it is always important to aim for a win-win situation regardless of how tricky the situation may be.

When asked about the one important lesson he learnt as a diplomat, he replied that there is no room for any sort of prejudice as delegates of different nationalities have helped him at different times and he has met many remarkable men and women from all parts of the world. To end off the questions regarding Singapore's foreign affairs, Prof Koh was asked how can the Singapore foreign service improve in conducting its diplomatic ties with other countries. He replied that the various parties, despite all their differences, must agree on the aims of Singapore foreign policy in order to secure her interest on the international stage. This is best encapsulated by a quote he heard from a colleague, "our quarrels should stop at the water's edge. Beyond the water's edge, we should be one."

Soon, questions fielded were focused on local politics. This was signalled by an audience member asking what advice our founding fathers such as Goh Keng Swee or S. Rajaratnam would give to the current generation of Singaporeans. In his usual humorous self, Prof Koh apologised for his inability to channel them through him but he posits that they, like him, would keep quiet since the younger generation do not like to take advice from the preceding generation.

Finally, when asked to comment on the political landscape on Singapore, he replied that it is indeed difficult to govern Singapore. Previously, it is enough for one to implement a good policy. Now, on top of coming up with good policies, one has to convince the people of its merits.

After purchasing a copy, I glanced at the contents and realised that what just took place is a general reflection of the contents of the book. The essays are structured based on the various hats that he has put on in his illustrious public service career. From paying tribute to his parents to giving advice on good negotiation or personal reflections on how to be happy, this tome certainly has a nice variety. I definitely look forward to reading this book to see what other bon mots this witty, humble and humorous ambassador has to offer.